ONG HOK HAM, A TRIBUTE

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The historian Ong Hok Ham died recently. I was and remain an admirer of Ong. I knew him when, as a student in America, he visited Cornell occasionally. And again when I was in Indonesia and he visited me, particularly in Solo, or when I stopped by at his place in Jakarta.

Ong's trajectory in life was new to me. I thought, as a young researcher, in professional terms. Ong did not. His topics were always related to the point of the politics he had lived through. I thought of him as an historian. But I think he thought of himself as a commentator on political events. He, as we know, was maltreated (to say the least) at the inception of the New Order. His work reflected the fact that he was, in some ways despite himself, drawn into politics. It was inevitable. He could not live an exclusively private life. He felt, in a way most Indonesians do not, the intrusion of the street and of the government. Most Indonesians, in my opinion, see themselves unselfconsciously as "Indonesians," all the while thinking of that status as both given to them and as something to be achieved. This is, indeed, an imaginary identification in Ben Anderson's terms. But Ong, partly because he was Chinese by origin, found himself a victim of forces that, taken in general, at least, as the expression of the nation, he supported. He never was less than optimistic about an eventual resolution of the question of "Chinese" Indonesian identity. I thought he was overly optimistic, but it was, in a way, his training as an historian, invoking a long view, that helped make him feel that comfort was available.

I speak of comfort because, though it is not a very strong idea in Indonesia, I believe comfort was important to Ong. Comfort is a relation to the environment, a folding of oneself into it (one is tempted to say "refolding"). The places I know where comfort is valued are, for instance, the countries of the Mahgreb. In the Mahgreb, comfort is a feature of the house. It shows that one is at peace and in security. And this despite unsettled and often violent politics.

Ong, in his house with its special design, found comfort. Not merely physically, in bed, where he often unselfconsciously received me, but in his delight in eating, literally ingesting what was around him with exceptional pleasure. With taste as well, since he depended more than most on the heightening of his own reactions to know just what it was that would give him pleasure. The same with books that he loved and collected. They were there to be enjoyed.

The Mahgrebian house, even in exile, is likely to show signs of identity. Pillows with mirrors and cloths with local designs reinforce the sense of who the inhabitants are. This is a way of drawing a line between public and private. To be a Kabylian in

Algeria or in France defines a large sector of private life. The line drawn by Ong, however, was not symbolic. The objects of his house were likely to be Javanese or from other ethnicities included in Indonesia—among them "Chinese." His house thus marked a sort of Javanese syncretism updated to be "Indonesian." Nothing in it marked a separation from the national realm. Some of these objects were valuable, others were not, but they were treated alike—with a certain casualness that seemed an attempt to make a Javanese mask feel comfortable in Jakarta Timur.

The design of the house itself was like this. There were here no specific ethnic references. The house was, rather, the sort that Frank Lloyd Wright might design were he required to do so in Indonesia. It was itself at home in the environment, letting in air and, all visitors will remember, mosquitos. Ong was indifferent to these little beasts. Or perhaps he enjoyed their small reminder that between inside and outside there was little difference and one could, therefore, feel free.

Frank Lloyd Wright's most famous creations were meant to fit into a prairie landscape. Ong's house, however, ignored the Jakarta of its setting, which, in any case, was in constant flux, the rice paddy near it being turned into house lots. It was the opposite of the Jakartan gated communities that refused access to the outside. It was not the landscape, in any case, that was solicited. It was the air, the weather, the tropical elements that were there before Batavia and before Jakarta, and which were and are resisted by both. The opposite, again, of Ong's attitude, which was of an elemental, corporeal belonging, before the symbolic itself and therefore letting in everyone.

This sense of comfort, so unemphasized in most of Indonesia, was, I am sure, a reaction of Ong to the opposite possibility, which had been inflicted on him. Seeking comfort was typical of him, in that it showed his emphasis on living and his optimism. One sees something of this in his political writings. It is a pleasure to read them because it was a pleasure for him to write them. He belonged to a strain in Indonesian culture that found cultural and personal differences enlivening. Even in the episodes he relates that ended badly, in his judgment, one has the satisfaction of coming to know interesting characters. His insistence on comfort enlarged his sense of how history moved. Indonesian society, for him, had a range of characters, and he wanted to know them without fear of having to judge them. It was this, in my opinion, that allowed him to continue to make his political commentaries at a time when he did not find the larger political climate to his taste.

Everyone must hope that his modestly expressed way of leading a comfortable and productive private-public life will be taken as an example. Despite the powerful forces, cultural first of all, that hollow out that possibility.